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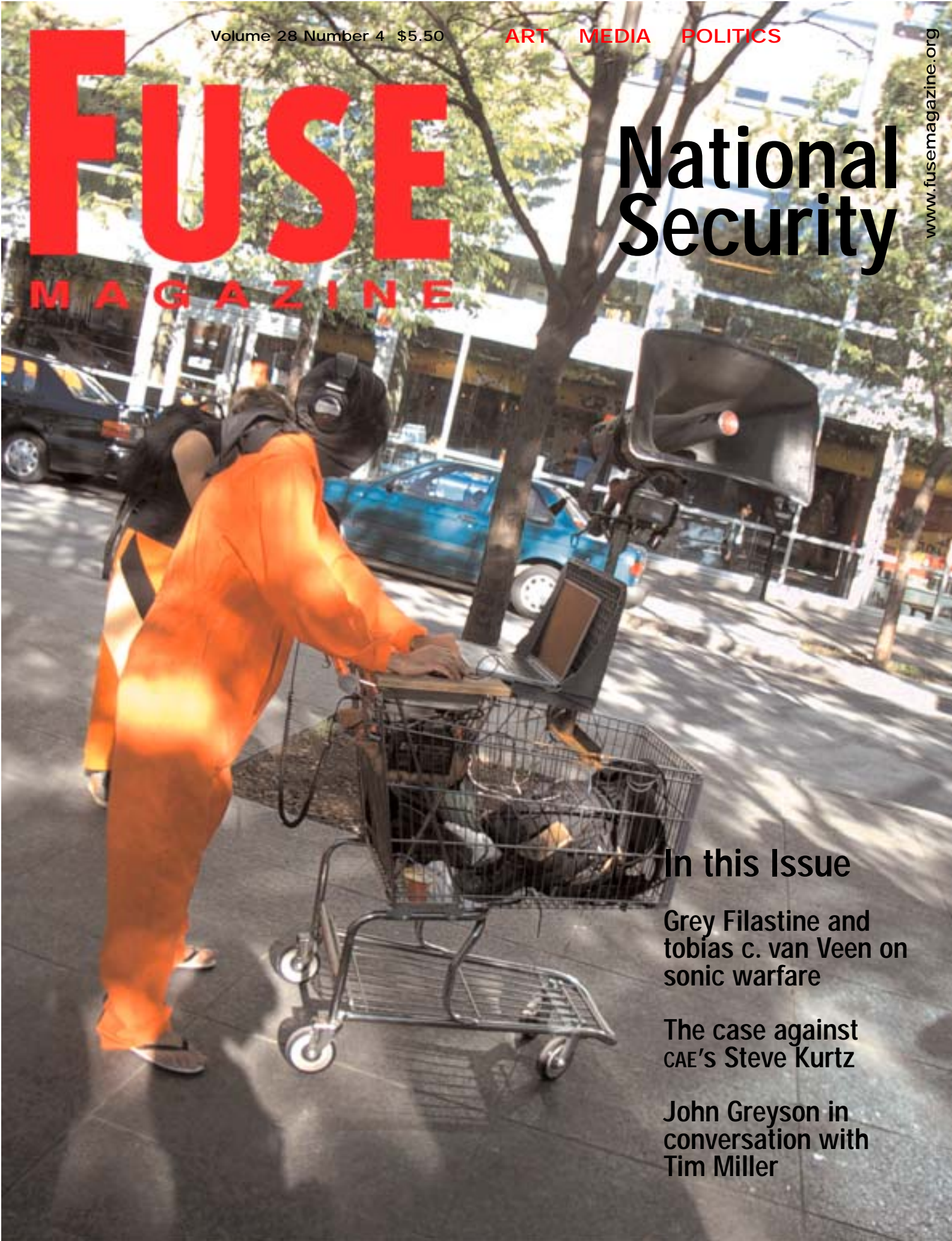
ART MEDIA POLITICS

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All images in this article are of Grey Filastine, *Noizekart* intervention, Mutek 2004, Photo: tobias c. van Veen

Sonic Warfare, Tactical SoundSystems and the Post-World of Grey Filastine

by tobias c. van Veen

Being involved in a conflict, you have the right to use the tools of conflict. That's what a lot of direct action is about. I feel that using this music in this way, as a force, is just using the tools in the toolbox.

— Grey Filastine¹

The deployment of sound as a tactic in social dis/organisation is as ancient as the arts themselves. Sound is the great alien communicator. It orbits our unconscious desires with transmissions from altered states; it leads to orgiastic bliss and ecstasy just as easily as it fuels hatred and destruction. Hence its inscription in military as well as pagan history. A great reductionist theory might inscribe all of human movement within this thought: the arrangement of human society as the rhythm clash between the soundtrack to the marching band vs. the talking drums of a ritual ...²

Many contemporary musicians exhibit the common trait of avoiding discussion of their practice. Sensationalist and often banal music journalism on the one channel and overwrought calls for theoretical justification on the other often buffer the sonic composer into silence. Yet, with the increasing incorporation of sophisticated, complex technologies — laptops, P2P file-sharing, sampling, software — the position of a cultural producer, interventionist, composer, etc., is even more intensified in the whirlwind of contention over issues of property,

author/ity, appropriation, and (live) performance. The retreat to an acousmatic formalism on behalf of a contingent of electro-acoustic and renegade avant-gardists has only added to the obfuscation. When the laptop is synecdoche to the (absent) (hu)man, it follows that the production of *sonic events* has been all too easily confused with the calculative operations of an algorithm. The horror show is substituted for the math lecture.³

Which is to provide somewhat of an intro to this wordswap with Grey Filastine. I

inadvertently experienced Mr. Filastine at some point in the mid-1990s at a ¡tchkung! concert on the west coast of North America. ¡tchkung! were the fire to the night. Noise-rhythms, AK-47s unloading blank clips over the crowd, pyrotechnics, screaming chants and a procession beyond the confines of the club to the street, invoking pavement occupations and late-night bonfires. ¡tchkung! were a no-holds barred invocation of anarchic potential in its immediacy, and provided the inspiration for the transposition of their energy and tactics, for me as well as others, into technoculture. As Grey puts it, "¡tchkung! was formed when a small posse of okie emigres, myself included, began mixing oil barrels, drums, power tools, radical politics, fire, and disruptive chaos in a squatted blackberry-overgrown forgotten corner of Seattle."

The first time I met Grey was in NYC 2003, playing at a benefit for *Sound Generation* (a forthcoming publication on tactical sound practitioners from Autonomedia). In June of 2004, Grey popped up for Mutek, Montreal's experimental electronic music festival, at which he demonstrated the intervention of his Noise-Kart. Wearing his orange Guantanamo prison suit and clad in a black bandana, Grey's shopping cart, laptop and loudspeaker set-up broadcasted high-volume militaristic noise barrages and eastern rhythms to the somewhat uncertain übercöolische of Mutek's digerati.

The common language of Grey's sonology — the "logic" of a particular sonic thread — is the drum.

The drum is the backbone to any military march, which is why any facile division between, say, bourgeois entertainment (as "spectacle") vs. avant-garde music (as "progressive") unstitches at the seams, even

more so when one considers the deployment of the drum throughout the world's vibrant cultures. To break the rhythm of the 4/4 is not necessarily a radical act: off-sync "avant-garde" rhythm often merely advocates complacency in an audience, constituting the audience as chair — rather than, say, *building* — squatters.

Which is perhaps why the drum drives the Infernal Noise Brigade (INB), an activist marching band co-founded by Grey in time for the Seattle WTO '99 demonstrations.⁴ The INB is a tightly organised unit: "We are a tactical mobile rhythmic unit consisting of a majorette, medic, tactical advisers, rifle twirling contingent, flag corps, sound generating kart, vocalists, horns, and between eight and twelve percussionists."⁵ The INB uses uniforms (green and black for political actions; orange, black and silver for non-political events), advanced organisation and complex rhythms ("complex rhythms ... create complex ideas"), to produce movement, impetus, trajectory: "The idea is to read the crowd, to be a social accelerant, a cultural accelerant, a street accelerant."

The inherent violence to sound is requisite of Filastine's desire to reclaim the "mob" and its vitality. Reclaim the Streets: Remix the Mob. In acknowledging that the State expects disorganised protest, one grasps that the collective organisation of sound is in itself a little understood *art*. An art in the sense of *tekhné*, a technology. A technology in the hands of the people (if even a "mob"), although also, in the everyday life, a technology rendered all but invisible in the efficient functioning of the State. People forget how to dance, save for purchasing the occasional two-step to an advertising jingle. Resample that old statement from *On the Poverty of Student Life*, whydontchya: "Proletarian revolutions will be *festivals* or they will be nothing, for

celebration is the keynote of the life they herald. *Play* is the fundamental principle of this festival, and the only rules it recognizes are to live without dead time and to enjoy without restraints."⁶

The following is a remixed transcript of a conversation. It's not so much an interview as a chance to replay the possibilities of a trajectory wherein a certain collaboration between the occupation movements of rave culture, the anarchic, mobile squats of Reclaim the Streets and the fiery protests of alter-globalization protests find their homecoming. And to get a sense of how this plugs into the questions that sharply define our time: militancy/fundamentalism, aesthetics/politics, technology/appropriation, us/them ...

Sound and System: Email and Transcripts, remixed 05.02–25.05, Japan/Montreal

tV: You run postworldindustries.com, an independent label and distributor. You are an ex-member of ¡tchkung! and founding marching band member of the Infernal Noise Brigade. You make your own beats, not so much "sampled" but collectively generated from the recording of your world travels. You have recently released a number of seven inches. You're off to the next G8 in Scotland, and replying from Japan. So Grey, how did you come to sound? I have some myths I tell myself as to how sound both affects me (beyond any "justification of politics") as well as how it has become a force to be engaged, to transform a situation ... these myths have to do with rave culture, and are very real, but are the imaginative framework which sustains the openness of the future. So, how did you start thinking, 'yeah, sound is the means to combust the scenario?'

Grey: I found sound through drums, which, are for my purposes, a noise

instrument. Nothing but the repetitious interruption of silence, the focused movement of air, or a disturbance. I think it's funny that rave culture and the electronic festival underground often refers to its events as "tribal." I totally agree, but not for the poorly executed riffs on traditional cultures, but because the music, with its repetition and experiential ritual, speaks to the pre-civilized part of the brain. Seeing as how civilization has brought us the regimentation of the clock, slavery in many forms, and the end of clean air and water, I'm fond of anything that experiments with reversing recent trends. By recent I mean like the past few thousand years. So, if each strike of a drum is a small explosion, than it's natural for me to consider it a political act, and that the explosions that I detonate have targets, and that my music is one very primitive but satisfying way to "combust the scenario." Sometimes I'm a bit more literal, as was the case in *jtchkung!* when we used blank-loaded AK-47s onstage in a taiko-inspired composition, or with this collaborative track I'm currently working on, which includes a baile funk rapper in Rio that features a lot of gunfire. Gunfire is often part of the vernacular of this music, but this time it is repurposed for a more political aim.

Arrhythmic sound too has a history of use in conflict, employed by both power and counter-power. Railey's Rodeo, a special US unit in World War II, is the first documented use of amplified sound to confuse and scare the enemy. They used massive loudspeaker trucks obscured by smoke to spread aural panic. [...] The counter-hegemonic use of ambient sound is less clear. I've certainly practiced this art with the Moukabir Sawte sound attacks on corporate media outlets during the onset of War on Iraq II.⁷ For this we surrounded different media headquarters, such as Fox, cbs, newspapers, Clear Channel Radio, and

the likes, with five different mobile loudspeaker stations. At a coordinated moment a collage blasted forth, part Muezzin call, party air-raid siren, media samples, Bush excerpts. After five minutes we disappeared and regrouped at the next target. [...] Within recorded sound there is a movement afoot where artists using gathered ambience as the palette for musical composition, and this is an excellent (and far more subtle) politic. Quiet American, AudioFile Collective, Climax Golden Twins, Sonarchy Radio are all working in this field, editing and composing dissonant ambiances.



tv: Ok, the reason I wanted to cover this ground was thinking about the way certain bands become representations, spectacles, entertainment, and how there is little connection between the musician and the audience save for an asymmetrical fan-worship on the one channel, perhaps disdain on the other; and then these other “bands,” these fringe musicians, where the whole idea is to generate a context for the mutual appreciation of sound and its force — i.e., to make connections with the people around you ... where the musician is part of the mix, so to speak. Does this make sense for you? Is this jiving with, for example, the way you might have felt when playing off your laptop in Barcelona, during the 2003 anarchist gathering and march?

Grey: Fortunately there was a flatbed-truck-based soundsystem on that anarchist march, so it was possible to provide the soundtrack. (Since I can't always count on someone else arranging a mobile soundsystem.) I've got my hands in two full range sound systems, one in Seattle and the other in Rio de Janeiro, and three shopping-cart-based systems, in Seattle, NYC and Berlin. And some even smaller ones, good only for interventions. I just finished the smallest model for this Japan trip. It fits in a shoulder bag, is incredibly loud and will be tested inside the biggest department store I can find here in Tokyo.

It's odd, but both my current projects, as opposite as they might seem, are a stab at circumventing a few levels of mediation, to deliver the sounds with a minimum of intermediaries. With the Infernal Noise Brigade, a marching band that plays amidst crowds, that's obvious, but with the material produced electronically, it results in a product that bypasses recording studios, record labels, distro networks, to be sold or given away directly by hand or via the internet, and can even be delivered to ears in public sphere venues via these mobile soundsystems.

tv: How does electronic music plug into the potential of crossing the performer/audience divide for you?

Grey: I'm just using the master's tools. Our current master is the global system of commerce and wealth consolidation. They build all the tools I use, the best thing I can do is steal and pirate as much as possible. It's awful to pay for something, I hate contributing to the market, circulating money, but you've got to work on the frontier to make anything interesting. The frontier is certainly in these little machines crunching binary. I've produced tracks and collaborated in all kinds of odd scenarios from Marrakech to Habana, why on earth would I want to be in a fucking rock and roll band? How soon can we sign off on rock as a dead art? Even punk — let's salvage the

attitude and discard the tired soundtrack. I'm not sure what can be accomplished by this music other than nostalgic references. It is a corpse. Back to drums — the drumkit used in nearly all modern music is called a trapset, short for contraption, because it was a contraption of different things innovated by a few really clever cats back in the day. Why did the innovation stop there and then fossilize? I think because companies got a hold of it and did their reverse-midas touch, which brings us back to the soul-sucking and numbing mediocrity of industrial capital.

tv: Does sampling contain the power to motivate a particular relation between performer and people? With the power of the laptop, does it approach something like the folk-guitar of the twenty-first century? I'm curious if this is what you're feeling when you travel to the east ... if this connection is being made.

Grey: Sampling has been powerfully argued as the beginning of the end of ownership, and with that I totally agree. The popularization of the laptop is only going to hasten this process. The results are interesting, but I'm a little concerned about old-fashioned things like respect, musicianship, and giving credit. Mostly because tech-privileged young white dudes mine from music of Afro-america or the world's poorest nations. It's usually harmless, but can get sketchy if profits are made, or if the aesthetic is so dubious that it degrades the original material. But I don't think that laptopism will replace guitars, because it can't be quickly and easily taught and shared, at least not yet. It could go that way, especially with the new powered PA speakers being put out, that we might see an expanded soundsystem culture, which is what it would take to elevate (or denigrate?) this music to a folk art.

How soon can we sign off on rock as a dead art? Even punk — let's salvage the attitude and discard the tired soundtrack.

tV: I have a few tendencies I want to address from the question of sampling: militancy and fundamentalism; aesthetics and ethics. These are somewhat connected in the matrix we are both involved in. For example, when you performed your Mutek 2004 intervention, there were beats sampled from corners of the Middle East. Through the broadcast megaphone, it sounded like calls to Jihad remixed.

Grey: The beats were of my own manufacture, mostly programmed, but some live playing and sampling of myself. There may have been some street noise and loud-speaker rebroadcasting samples from Morocco, Egypt, Turkey or India that may give the impression of something angry happening, but for the most part these sounds are apolitical, only through the disassociated context do they take a political hue. With these public sound interventions I always include these kinds of sounds; there are many reasons for this, both philosophical and emotional. The idea is to re-broadcast ambience recorded in the ragged edges of this empire, curating these sounds into collage for an attack on the silence at the center. North America is aurally located at the eye of a hurricane ... destruction all around the world and calmness at the center, and I have this rare opportunity to redistribute the chaos. The less theoretical reason I put these sounds into the mix is simply that I love them, and it is a purely aesthetic tribute.

tV: In practice, how does one — how do you — go about sampling and recording beats from across the world without becoming one of these beat-mining white dudes, as you put it? What relations do you establish (personal, political, economic) to develop connections to this other world?

In a situation wherein sound is used as a tactical force — in militant situations —

The fact that people in the wealthy states know little about music except as promoted and sold by the big five record companies is an embarrassment, and pretty clearly demonstrates how the flow of information works in the world ...

sampling and engaging “the East” is also about learning cultures of militancy and how this might differ, I would hope, from militarism. This is a fine line and a fine distinction: like understanding that Jihad is about reforming the self, not that different from Socrates when he said “know thyself” (sampled from the pagan Oracle at Delphi, of course). And that the perception of Jihad as equivalent to “Holy War” is quite a misfire, so to speak, but also one that serves the west’s attempts and ideologies to conquer “the East.”

So what ethical considerations/questions do you ask yourself when engaging and sampling, musically, personally, politically? And it follows: what *aesthetic* considerations/questions do you ask yourself or investigate when hitting the question of ethics? E.g., how do you know when sampling a polyrhythmic drum from Marrakech borderlines on the superficial resonance of “worldbeat” and “ethnobreaks”?

Grey : First of all, let’s strike that term — worldbeat — from our language. Can there be a more ethnocentric term? If you go to Nigeria or Nepal they can identify and distinguish between nearly all of popular music forms from the English world. The fact that people in the wealthy states know little about music except as promoted and sold by the big five record companies is an embarrassment, and



pretty clearly demonstrates how the flow of information works in the world: the entire “developing” world is just a big homogenous glob, a place where resources are collected, labour is outsourced, and where they’d better acculturate to our model or risk getting labeled as a rogue state.

tv: This comes down to the almost impenetrable question: how can one be critical of the point wherein the context allows us to say “ha! that is CHEESE — and its sampling, here, is unethical”? What are the markers of this context, for you?

This is a difficult question ... I can see there being no answer in firm and forever (of course not — for this is a complex interplay between cultures, musics,

rhythms, politics, peoples) ... what I want to do is figure out ways to talk about it. Or, act: it feels like you encountered these difficulties with the release of Mamouat Abde ElHakim’s *Direct from the Djma al Fna*. Can you tell me a bit about it?

Grey: I was in Morocco in 2000, visiting the Master Musicians of Jajouka and traveling around recording the street sounds. On this trip I spent a lot of time in the Djema al Fna, the central square of Marrakech, recording street musicians. I was recording just for my own later listening, not really for sampling or anything because it’s usually not very appropriate. After a few years of listening to one particular group I decided that I should release an album of their music. I wasn’t sure they were still alive, since they are old

men, but I came with some amazing volunteers — a sound engineer, photographer and translator, and managed to conduct a session and produce this album. About a year later I returned and delivered a few boxes of cd’s. It was pretty intense for them to see the full on jewelcase with all the photos, liner notes, and all.

[As for the aesthetics and ethics]: This is so personal, frequently I can’t stomach some music [...]. This can make you feel like a snobby asshole, but you can’t deny your own sensibilities. I believe that how this interplay is defined and executed will be a fluid matter, and that we are only beginning to learn how to do this well.

tv: I get the sense that fluidity, here, is what matters: that by travelling,

becoming-fluid, seeking to make connections, the charges of a “cultural tourism” are evaded (or foregrounded) as it becomes more than apparent that what you are doing is generating ad-hoc social networks and permanent nodes. That at your best, you seek not to represent the world but to become so involved in its spinning that you cannot distance yourself from cultural otherness: becoming at home in the world, and, perhaps, a stranger in your own country. You hold it open before you, I feel, as a negotiation: is this the case?

Grey: Exactly, it is a phenomena of inverse proportion. The more internationalized the less nationalized. Obviously I've never come from a position of nationalism, but being a citizen of any nation builds from birth a set of unconscious references and codes that give a sensitive insight into your country's modus operandi. Any expanded consciousness wrought by interfacing with different cultures usually results in a distancing from your own, at least in my experience. With regards to nodes and networks, I believe this is the difference between living vs. touring or travelling, the former necessitating both more time and energy, learning some language, and integrating with local underground projects. Paul Bowles once defined a distinction between tourists and travelers, but with so many stoned post-ravers and ersatz adventurers who are self-identified travelers, it's not a word that I can embrace.

tV: Have there been spaces and times in which this fluidity and negotiation hasn't worked? In which you have either been accosted, harmed, threatened, or, when you've come away feeling that you've done something wrong?

Grey: Normally a performer, especially one that travels from a distant country,

gets paid, but this can get ambiguous when I'm coming from a financially rich nation and performing in a poor one. It can get a little sticky trying to negotiate what is fair, but I've only had things go sour once — recently in Buenos Aires. Usually I leave it to the promoter's discretion. Much of the earth's money is consolidated in the United States and I've got a few ways of extracting it, so performing at a loss or gifting music is sometimes okay. I've received a few small grants too, but usually pimping myself to the non-profit world is more trouble than it's worth, life is too short to deal with that crap.

And sure, I've been robbed, attacked by a mob and things like that while abroad, but usually it is unrelated to any transgression other than having more money in my wallet. Although it sucks, I understand it, if I lived in some of these situations I would think about robbing me, and certainly try to pull some hustle. Just to be clear, the most extreme hostility I encounter is in the United States, where I've been beaten by both white skinheads and young black kids in acts of semi-random violence, driven I suppose by the alienating and divisive culture of that place. Also, I drive a taxi and what's curious is that I've never been robbed, but have been assaulted many times for no compelling reason.

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Sample Sources

- 1 "Music for an Angry Mob." Grey Filastine interviewed by Lex Bhagat in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* 1:2 (2003). <<http://www.journalofaestheticsandprotest.org/1/musicMob/index.html>> . This interview is slated for publication in *Sound Generation*, ed. Alexis Bhagat, (Brooklyn: Autonomedia Press).
2. In fact, one finds nearly this thesis — or at least its form — in Jacques Attali, *Noise: The political economy of music*, trans. Brian Massumi. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).
3. Which is not to belittle algorithmic development in sound research (say, the brilliant genesis of granular synthesis, for example). But it is to question where and how a sonic event differs from a pedagogical exercise in sound articulation, the latter perhaps just as interesting, but lacking the force to provoke what sound can upset.
4. See <<http://www.infernalnoise.org/>>.
5. From "Music for an Angry Mob," the *inB* statement. All quotes in this paragraph from the article.
6. Situationist International and some students at the University of Strassbourg, *On the Poverty of Student Life*, trans. Lorraine Perlman. (Detroit: Black and Red, 2000), p. 29.
7. See the video: <<http://postworldindustries.com/video/MoukabirSawtestream.mov>>. Also the Cocktail Hour: <http://postworldindustries.com/video/Cocktail_Hour.mov>